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AUTHOR Cook-Gumperz, Jenny; Scales, Barbara
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ABSTRACT

It is maintained in this paper that, though rarely acknowledged, gender neutrality operates as an official curricular ideology, and thus the organizational force of gender in school settings is often hidden in unnoticed interactional and discourse practices. To examine this phenomenon, the play activities of 4- and 5-year-old girls and boys in an ethnically mixed preschool were analyzed from videotapes, and interviews with the children on their understanding of gender identity and their social representations of gender were conducted. Based on the results of these analyses and interviews, a case is made that preschool teachers, and adults in general, fail to notice the children's own ideas on the role of gender during play. In support of this assertion, a number of vignettes are presented. Developmentally based nursery programs encourage children to initiate their own play and be self-directed in their learning in a rich and stimulating, albeit gender-neutral, environment. But because the child's need to use gender as a category in the realization of a personal self do not match the ideological world view of the adults, they may be ignored or left unaddressed in the gender-neutral classroom. Contains 14 references. (MDM)

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SRCD, New Orleans, 1993.
Constituting Gender Through Talk
Chair:Amy Kyratzis
Susan Ervin-Tripp and Martin Lampert,Amy Kyratzis,
Maria Pak, Jenny Cook-Gumperz and Barbara Scales
Discussant Amy Sheldon

GIRLS, BOYS AND PEOPLE; GENDER AND THE DISCOURSE OF THE NURSERY SCHOOL.

Jenny Cook-Gumperz, UC Santa Barbara: Dept of Education
Barbara Scales, UC Berkeley Child Study Center

Abstract

Though rarely acknowledged, gender neutrality operates as an official curricular ideology, and thus the organizational force of gender in school settings is often hidden in unnoticed interactional and discourse practices. Play activities of four- and five-year-olds in an ethnically mixed preschool were analyzed from videotapes, and interviews were conducted on the children's' understanding of gender identity and their social representations of gender. The study analyzes the processes by which gender is interactionally constructed and socially interpreted by pre-school children.

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In our work over the past few years, we have found that even in the earliest years of preschool gender is an important factor in children's construction of their social identity, one which has great organizational power in their daily lives.(Cook-Gumperz & Scales 1986; Scales & Cook-Gumperz 1993) Though important throughout school activities, gender rarely receives explicit acknowledgement. Rather, gender neutrality operates as an official curricular ideology. Thus, the organizational force of gender is often hidden in unnoticed interactional and discourse practices in school activities.

Our observations are supported by those of Vivian Paley (1984), who describes, in her studies of kindergarten classes, teachers' attempts to avoid sex-stereotyped play by making the traditional areas of the nursery school--the doll corner and the block area--into neutral zones. These efforts are defeated, however, by the children's desire to maintain domains of conventionalized interactional and discourse practices (Cook-Gumperz & Corsaro, 1977). Instead, Paley finds that stereotyping by gender is well established among children's play activities by the time they reach the age of five.

In this paper we describe our current exploration of these issues and how children use gender constructs interactionally in the discourse of their play. The data being used here, collected in a preschool of four- and five-year-old children, included ethnographic observation and recording of interactional play episodes. On another occasion children in the school were interviewed about their perceptions of gender identity and their understanding of some social representations of gender. Interviews focused on the children's assumptions about who can use or be involved in social occasions that are important both for adults and for children. In the interviews, photographs of realistic and familiar settings and objects were discussed with the children. These settings came both from the pre-school, where areas like the climbing structure and the playhouse predominantly attract either boys or girls, and included some generalized settings such as kitchens and offices. The

photographs focused on objects that are associated with adult uses, e.g, trucks and cars.

We hope to demonstrate that the perception and expression of social gender is neither developed in isolation nor hidden from view. As we proposed in a previous paper, the junction of the biologically given and the socially chosen and communicated makes gender a most powerful social construct.(Scales & Cook-Gumperz 1993). Since gender is a feature that can easily be indexed, it is one of the most accessible social categories available to children and so becomes much more central to the children's construction of a social self than many would allow. For these reasons, attempts to neutralize or eliminate gender expression from classroom and other experiences neglects the significance of gender in the development of the whole child

We know that children begin to express specific perceptions of social gender difference as early as ages three and four (Lloyd & Duveen, 1991). Developmentally, this awareness can be seen as the consequence of a cognitive advance in children's ability to classify and deal with similarities and differences even though at this early age the cognitive advance is not well equilibriated.(Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1992). As a consequence, children tend to see the two genders as polar extremes such that girls and boys are perceived as the opposites of each other. Teachers and parents are often dismayed by the stereotypic form that a child's social awareness of gender differences can take despite the fact that when children use gender categories as active social guides to their own behavior, the attributes of social gender may take on a different aspect.

Often, however, children's gender perceptions do reflect aspects of the culture at large, which at present, even for adults, frequently define gender as opposing groups (Faludi, 1992). For some researchers these childhood representations of difference are seen as building into a dichotomy in which the sexes are seen as two different cultures (Maltz & Borker, 1982), and children's development of gender roles is a

playing out of this adult script. Some recent research suggests that the differential between the boys' and girls' groups may both mimic and reflect the adult culture's predominant notions about management of power (Kyratzis, 1992). According to this view, men and women occupy separate cultures wherein the different evolutions and natures of the two can be accounted for by society's existing power relationships.(Tannen, 1990). From this point of view, the achievement of social identity for children, as manifested in differences between girls' and boys' social choices, while not biologically predetermined, does become a necessary given in the interactional experience of children themselves.

From our own research we see that gender differentials are more fluid and dynamic than is allowed for in any single-script view. Taking the perspective that children define themselves with respect to others and partake of both cultural and developmental influences, we see that gender differentials are continuously being negotiated and vary in differing contexts. What distinguishes gender is not an *a priori* script provided to a child at or before birth in each culture, society, or social group. Instead, what distinguishes gender is the product of *particular* interactions. The identity choices that emerge will be unique. They will, in addition, be influenced by particular constellations of the child's personal social context, e.g., the gender of siblings, the child's birth order and place in the family, the presence or absence of two parents in the home, and the presence or absence of step family.(Dunn & Plomin, 1990). In this paper we suggest that the processes by which gender is achieved and interpreted in early schooling reveals a more complicated picture of how social gender is constructed.

We begin by looking at how children talk about gender at work in the settings and activities of their own world. As children attempt to solve everyday problems, their views, while still not yet well equilibriated, appear to be more sensitive to local social and family contexts. According to the gender separate script view, they draw upon

multiple sources when putting together their own social constructs. In the following example, a four-year-old boy is discussing with a researcher some pictures of things that adults do; in this case, drive cars and trucks. In a way common to many children of his age, he uses gender differences as a category that must be distributed fairly between the objects and persons. In order to explain how the adults he knows actually behave he attempts to reason how deviant cases work, but his reasoning attempts are interrupted by the interviewer as he tries perhaps to say that "Suburbans," because they are minivans, are neither trucks nor cars so can "belong" in either category and thus be driven by either men or women..

Matt's Interview

Matt:	Yeah, when I grow up I'm gonna learn how to drive a car.
Res.:	Okay. And how about a truck?
Matt:	A truck?
Res.:	Will you drive that, too, do you think, or not?
Matt:	Yeah, I can drive either one [truck or car].
Res.:	Okay. Now, when girls grow up, do you think they'll drive one of these things?
Matt:	Yeah, but they only grow up to moms, and boys grow up to dads.
Res.:	Uh huh.
Matt:	Dads can drive trucks and girls can drive cars. But sometimes dads can drive cars and moms can drive trucks.
Res.:	They can do that?
Matt:	Yeah, but if we have a suburban, which . . .

Res.: What's that?

Matt: It's not a truck.

Res.: Oh. When girls in this school grow up, do you think they'll be able to drive trucks?

Matt: Uh, our mom know how to drive trucks.

Res.: Do you think that means that other girls can drive trucks?

Matt: Yeah, other big girls.

Res.: Uh huh.

Matt's views show us that he is aware of the gender divisions in the adult world yet, since in his family these no longer follow the traditional gender script lines, he must fit gender into both the knowledge he has of cars, vans, minivans and trucks, and the needs of a genderized world. Matt's effort to integrate his knowledge is more accurately accounted for by a developmental view of gender differentials that would hold that children's perceptions of gender evolve and are elaborated from personal life experiences and particular interactions between and among boys and girls. In the case of Matt's reasoning about how adult "girls and boys" behave with respect to driving activities, the child maps his own knowledge of his family onto his more abstract reasoning about the social representations of gender.

From this vignette we observe that children attempt to reason about gender as a social category and adapt it to the specific circumstances of their own lives. Clearly, however, the category holds great significance for them, and we see its more stereotypic, or one-dimensional, forms surface in talking about gender as a generalized, abstract category. There is unmistakable evidence that children use gender differentiations in distinct ways to manage their social world.and

interactions, and such evidence holds even across cultures (see Suito & Reifel, 1992). One must conclude that gender must be one of the most salient of categories that children can use to master the social order of their lives.

The following episode that occurred at a University based preschool will help demonstrate the organizational power in the genderized nature of children's interactive play, even in a relatively gender neutral classroom. Such genderized play commonly goes on unnoticed as a hidden curriculum unless it takes an overtly aggressive form (usually on the part of boys) when attempts are made to prohibit rather than understand it. Close examination of the unfolding sequences of the following interactional episodes reveals the influential role of gender interactions on players and the course of their play.

The episode begins when three girls, Jennifer age 4.9, Emily, age 3.10 and Alicia, age 4. 5, enter a carpeted area of the classroom. They gather around a small sand tray with such accessories as miniature people and animals on the right and an array of various size unit blocks to the rear of the area. In segment 1, at the beginning of the activity, the three girls start a play episode typical of the play in the sand box. They begin by constructing a house setting into which characters will be introduced.

From the block shelves Alicia brings a set of four nesting blocks to the sand tray and announces, "We'll build a house," and Jennifer responds, "Here, I'll help." Alicia begins to put out the set of nesting blocks, taking two of largest for herself and the next largest for Jennifer, and leaving the third, the smallest, for Emily. She establishes agreement for this arrangement with Jennifer by saying "Emily has the smallest, right?" Jennifer adroitly persuades Emily of the virtue of this inequitable distribution of the props a few lines later with "Well, actually you only get/you get the smallest one. Okay? Actually I thought you wanted to do a small one.." [lines 6- 17]

6	Ali	Yea. I'm gonna take care of that thing. (...) Here, I'll get this over here. We'll build a house.	Crosses over to stacking boxes on shelf, brings them back to sandbox.
7	Jen	Here, I'll help.	
8	Ali	OK, this one/I'm sure/is Emily's. I'll have this one and this one. I'll have these two.	Jennifer and Alicia both start building house. Jen takes some blocks, picking up one box, carrying two around side of sand table.
9	Jen	(That's fine with me)	
10	Ali	Emily has the smallest castle, right?	Alicia stacking blocks.
12	Jen	Emily	
13	Emi	What?	
14	Jen	We left a box for you, you can have a toy.	
15	Emi	(.....) Well, I get the big, big (...)	Emily crosses back to sandbox between Alicia and Jennifer.
16	Jen	Well, actually you only get/you get the smallest one. okay // Actually I thought you wanted do a small one.	
17	Ali	(I like) the big one. (I've got)	

The girls begin to establish the outlines of a domestic scenario involving making food, tending and feeding pets, and tidying the area.

Alicia introduces a topic: "Sweep our roads. Sweep our roads, every body . . sweep here." Jennifer follows with a topic about making rice, which Alicia takes up also. The following bit of transcript illustrates how the various aspects of a domestic theme are coordinated by the three girls [lines 32- 46]:

32	Ali	Sweep our roads. Sweep our roads. (everybody... sweep here). ( )	Sweeping side of sand table.
33	Jen	We have enough rice and we're gonna make//soon as we get enough rice we're gonna make/gonna make food.	Emily leaves.
34	Ali	Yes//Wah, wah, wah// Here's my rice/my rice and here's my baby.	Emily returns.
35	Jen	( ) are you making/are you making (all the good food for us?)	
36	Emi	Yes, I am.	
37	Jen	Are you sure you're not making (dog) (meat).	
38	Emi	I'm not making any dog meat. ( ).	
39	Ali	We're sweeping the roads.	
40	Jen	Oh, good.	Alicia stands up.

41	Ali	But be careful/we won't sweep your trail.	
42	Jen	OK. You know what?	
43	Ali	(....dogs...)	
44	Jen	We're eating/the dogs are having plenty of food so they .../they (get...) this great food.	Alicia crosses over to Jennifer.
45	Ali	Hello, I'm the dog from the house over here and the mommy and the daddy and the baby.	Alicia sits next to Jennifer.
46	Jen	Hey! There's dust on our road.	

Some moments later four boys, Marc, age 4. 5., Nathan, Age 4.1, and twins Colin and Stewart, age 4.3, enter the block play area where the three girls have now moved their play. The boys are chanting, "Looking for a lost bunny. Looking for a lost bunny, etc." They stop in front of the girls' block structure and ask if they have seen a bunny. [This query is made despite the fact the bunny was never allowed in the classroom and, if lost, generally was found to have burrowed under a small structure near a large sand pit in the playyard.] As they leave, the girls watch intently without moving and then resume their play. The domestic theme seems somewhat altered, however, and Jennifer's high pitched play-voice is now heard calling "Help, help." Alicia expands this role play theme with her own contribution: "Help, mommy, help mommy." The arrival of a group of boys has begun to distort the play theme of a quiet domestic activity. The girls incorporate their anxiety

over the boys' actions by developing a theme of lost and search with their own play characters. [lines 221-236]:

221	Mar	Come on, you guys.	Marc comes in, speaks to others (<u>not</u> to Alicia, Emily, Jennifer).
222	Nat	Looking for a lost bunny. Looking for a lost bunny - for a lost bunny - looking for a lost bunny.	Boys come through - Nathan, Colin, Stewart - Marc continues on/off screen.
223	Mar	Put that in the box.	
224	Nat	(You know) have you seen a bunny?	
225	Emi	No	
226	Jen	No/no bunny at all.	Nathan, T & A stop at Jennifer & Emily
227	Mar	Well, if you see one - call us.	
228	Nat	If you see one, call us.	
229	Col	If you see one, call us.	
230	Jen	( )	
231	Emi	Look in this one ( )	Marc comes back.
		Kitty chase - chase any animal it wants to eat anybody or be anything back.	Marc goes off. Nathan follows.

232	Ali	Can these persons (have) a tall (bridge)	Colin and Stewart follow.
233	Jen	(Help! Help!)	
234	Ali	Look, I covered (it) with a block.	Alicia and Jennifer watch after them.
235	Emi	(Great) can this kitty ( )	Jennifer goes to large blocks
236	Ali	Help mommy, help mommy.	Jennifer comes back.

As the next segment demonstrates, in keeping with the somewhat more ominous tone of the domestic play and just prior to another entrance of the boys, Emily, the youngest of the three girls, introduces two new topics: "bad guys and "traps." Then efforts are made by the three interactants to integrate the various new topics. After a further and, this time, considerably more intrusive foray by the group of boys into the block area, the themes of "traps," being "caught," and needing "help" begin to multiply.

The final sequence begins when Nathan, Marc, and a new player, Darrel, age 4.4, come into the area and begin to play near the girls, passing behind them to obtain blocks to build a "hideout." In a rather loud voice, Marc is alternately singing, "We're working" or "We're walking" as the boys obtain large blocks and go back and forth to an adjacent area. Throughout this activity the girls attempt to ignore the boys and continue their play despite the fact that the boys keep walking nearby to select blocks from shelves to the rear, and on occasion furtively steal blocks from the girls' structure. In this segment, the girls' play seems more and more involved in the "trap" theme; being stuck in the trap and needing help. The girls seem intent on ignoring the boys' rather obtrusive play nearby until Jennifer says, "See those two boys." The boys now are chanting, "Keep on working" and

sometimes "Keep on walking" as they continue to pass near the girls to obtain more and more blocks. Now Emily is again distracted and picks up their theme when she discovers a microphone in the area and begins to speak into it, "Work, hello, keep on work//work. I have to work. I have to go to work, Jennifer." Jennifer addresses the situation at line 499 by saying to her two friends, but also so the boys can overhear, in an ultra polite request ." . . and we should say to be quiet" (lines 471-526):

471	Ali	That would look (excellent)	Nathan comes in for another block.
472	Jen	(Alicia) look it (I found)	
473	Emi	Pretend the girl (tail) got stuck in here.	
474	Nat	Gotch, gotcha, gotcha, boom.	
475	Emi	(Jennifer), Alicia pretend this girl (tail) got stuck in here.	Marc comes by. Walks
476	Jen	Hey! Hey, I'm stuck in the trap. (Hey, there's a trap here, there's a trap here. Ah, help, help, help, help)	around Alicia, Emily, and Jennifer
477	Emi	(In the house)	
478	Jen	Help, help, some horse help	Nathan comes around to get block.
479	Ali	(Ahhh *sound high & babyish)*	

480	Nat	Doie, doie, doie, (etc. . .)	
481	Ali	Oh, I need to get my pony.	
482	Jen	I'll stay right here.	Alicia crosses around and gets her toy.
483	Emi	( )	
484	Ali	( )	
485	Jen	Who's that // // ( ) Oww/ // I'm going for a long walk.	
486	Emi	(where) that place ( )	Teacher goes over to boys, talks with them.
487	Emi	(She can jump) down from the water	Jennifer gets up, gets block. Darrel and Nathan come in over to shelves.
488	Mar	(off screen) Come on, we need a bit more.	
489	Nat	Quick, Darrel.	
490	Emi	( ) slide down (a fall)	Gets blocks.
491	Jen	(see) those two boys.	
492	Emi	We're having fun with the (tea?) because you can slide down and land on here // OK? OK? ( )	

493	Jen	( ) // Open this gate door and ( ) let me out.	
494	Ali	Oww, oww, oww (etc.)	
495	Emi	(Let's play with my) these three ponies, OK? These three ponies, OK// // (We're playing) with these three ponies, OK? ( )	Emily gets to other side of Alicia and Jennifer.
496	Jen	(now, now)	The three boys come in behind sandbox and start singing,
497	Mar	(Let's go to working) Keep on working.	"Keep on working," sometimes "Keep on walking" - approx. 25 times.
498	Emi	Work, hello, keep on worker// //(un ko)	Emily finds mike and speaks directly into it, then to Alicia and Jennifer.
		I have to go work, I have to go work, Jennifer ( )	
499	Jen	( ) And we should say to be quiet we should say you should be quiet, we should say be quiet, we should say you should be quiet.	Three boys still singing as above. Emily leaves. Teacher interrupts, talks to boys. They start singing again.
500	Emi	Do you want to see a ring? Do you want to see a ring.	Boys still singing. Alicia covers her ears. [some whispering here]
501	Jen	Hey, look it. Hey, are you dead?	

502	Ali	No, I'm not.	Boys still singing.
503	Jen	Well, I don't mean to interrupt you.	
504	Emi	This, this girl (kept on) walking and walking and walking and walking.	
505	Jen	Pretend she was walking this way.	
506	Emi	And she fell off here.	Alicia and Emily come behind Jennifer.
507	Ali	( )	
508	Jen	[sings]	
509	Ali	( )	
510	Emi	And she had no ( )	
511	Ali	( ) her space.	
512	Jen	Hey (look out) // I'm just hurting myself ( ) like this, and I don't want to fall down and hurt myself (again).	
513	Emi	( )	
514	Ali	Help, help! ( )	
515	Emi	We're just walking her and walking and walking and walking.	

516	Jen	Help me. I'm in the hole, help me, I'm in the hole ( ).	Alicia and Emily come over.
517	Ali	Be careful because there's a cliff (and) right here and you could fall off and hurt yourself.	
518	Jen	(Maybe) I'll just leave her right here.	
519	Ali	(OK, maybe not too close.)	
520	Emi	Pretend she fell off // OK / OK	
521	Jen	( ) her girlfriend.	
522	Ali	Ah, Ah, help us quick. I'm falling. See ( )	
523	Emi	Oh ah (we're knocking through) (that's okay), the whole bridge this (kelp) this (kelp) made their own house, (right here).	Emily brings some blocks over.
524	Jen	Can we go back and play with the sandbox again?	
525	Ali	No, this (looks) better	
526	Jen	OK, but the sandbox was much (more) OK?	Off screen - Darrel knocks down the boys' house; teacher approaches.

We note in this long passage from the videotaped episode that at the point that Jennifer suggests that they should say "be quiet," the theme of "walking" that the boys have utilized in their play finally gets incorporated into the girls' play. Emily says: "This, this girl (kept on) walking and walking and walking and walking and walking," and Jennifer incorporates the walking topic by saying, "Pretend she was walking this way." Emily follows with her own theme expansion: " . . . and she fell off here." It is from this point on that themes of danger, falling, etc become more intense and cohesive among the girls. Here Emily has become much more assertive, reverberating the boys' theme of "working" to "walking" and attempting to develop more aggressive activities, such as knocking over blocks.

Looking at these episodes as the playing out of a psychodrama, we can see how the tension builds as the two gender different groups establish themselves in juxtaposition and begin to define themselves through their talk and actions. The existence of the other is clearly recognized by both groups but is not initially allowed to disturb the rhythm of the girls' activities. Gradually, as the girls find the boys' activities both a threat and a challenge,the girls' topics of talk move into some synchrony with the boys'. The themes of talk move from those of danger and helplessness and incorporate the same chants and words as the boys are using. Looking at the tape, we see the boys attempt to enter into the girls' enclosed world of activity first by creating a diversion and then by positioning their play in juxtaposition to the girls' domain. Further in the episode we can see that both groups have influenced each other's talk and activities to a point where the original themes of their separate play breaks down, and both parties finally leave the scene. We suggest that by establishing a presence within proximity of each other both the girls and boys begin to realize themes that define themselves collectively as gendered beings who then engage in a power struggle for control of their own play scenario. While the girls' original play theme of domestic activities could be seen as more "girlish," their own

awareness of gender begins only when the boys' proximal presence influences their domain, making it necessary to establish a distinctive, shared definition of group identity of a "girls' world" if their play is to continue. And for the girls we see this expressed in the introduction in their play of themes of helplessness and potential danger.

Conclusion

Here we see how, for a vivid period, the children's "hidden agenda" of gender became visible in this preschool classroom. We wonder in retrospect why no effort was made by the teacher to integrate the two playing groups. Perhaps she wanted to avoid a direct confrontation of these two genderized groups. How could she guide the children's creation of possible roles and themes for more integrated play? In ignoring this hidden agenda adults, such as this teacher, who seemed to fail to notice the gender interactive aspects of the block play, may lose a precious opportunity to advance our understanding of the ways that gender intersects with the developmental needs of children. Children may require more active adult intervention at troublesome junctures in their activities in order to evolve more meaningful and possibly more nurturant perceptions of their own and others' gender roles (Gilligan et al , 1989).

It is issues like these with which the teacher in early childhood education grapples in facing the need to support both the children's optimal development and their autonomy. Developmentally-based programs encourage children to initiate their own play and be self-directed in their learning in a rich and stimulating, albeit gender-neutral environment. But because the child's needs to use gender as a category in the realization of a personal self do not match the ideological world view of the adults, they may be ignored or left unaddressed in the gender neutral classroom.

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